

A few thoughts about Remaining Calm...

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Earlier this week while on my daily 3-mile walk I was listening to *Unlocking Us*, Brené Brown's new podcast. As you would expect she was talking about uncertainty, anxiety and fear in this, the Age of COVID. I absolutely recommend, not just the April 3rd episode I listened to, but her entire series, which by-the-way, only began a few weeks ago. So, Google *Unlocking Us* or go to your favorite podcast provider and download *Unlocking Us* by Brené Brown.

The episode I'm speaking of is titled: *Anxiety, Calm and Over/Under-Functioning*. In the podcast, Brené provides a definition of Calm that has great relevance for me, and I think you will also appreciate it.

Remaining CALM in this time of heightened uncertainty, anxiety and fear, requires ***perspective, mindfulness and the ability to manage emotional reactivity***.

These three components, *perspective, mindfulness and the ability to manage emotional reactivity* really captures the essence of what I am trying to put into practice every day. Maintaining a balanced perspective amid the furry of news stories and scary conversations can be challenging. It's important for me to look at the facts...because facts help me to gain and maintain perspective. The facts are, it's bad, and it might get worse. It's also a fact that I can...and am...doing what I can to take care of myself and those I love. I'm exercising every day; I'm eating right and getting plenty of sleep. I'm practicing safe distancing from others while remaining socially and emotionally connected to family and friends. And, I'm blessed with the skill and opportunity to be useful and of service to others. Every day I remind myself of these facts because every day...every hour...sometimes every minute my perspective is challenged by what I see on TV or read or hear from a neighbor or just the scary, crazy thoughts that "pop up" in my brain.

Maintaining Perspective requires me to remain clear thinking so I can understand and process the facts. I have a good brain and the only way I can disable my brain is if I allow my emotions to flood my brain and take my cognitive abilities off-line.

So, let's unpack and understand the connection among perspective, mindfulness and the management of emotional reactivity.

I think of Mindfulness as my built-in emotional sonar. To be mindful means to be aware of or to "pay attention" to what is happening. In this case, I want to be mindful of my emotional self. I'm intentionally paying attention to my emotions, "listening" as it were, for the faint sound of anxiety, of anger or of fear. I'm also

listening for other less obvious emotions that I know, from my experience of being me, to be pathways to emotions that can flood my brain. Restlessness, boredom, frustration, irritability, confusion, and feeling uptight, alone, or insignificant are all triggers to some extent. Let me be clear, I'm not saying I want to purge myself of these emotions. Not only is that not possible...it wouldn't be healthy and if somehow, I could accomplish that, I would strip away the essence of my humanity because I would also lose joy, and wonder, and awe, and every yummy human emotion there is including love.

So, no I don't want to purge my uncomfortable emotions. I want to give them voice because they often have something important to say, but I don't want to allow them to be in charge. Mindfulness allows me to alert myself to my emotional self so I can help all my emotions find a seat at the table while at the same time, not allowing scary emotions to sit at the head of the table and be in charge.

This brings me to the third component of Brené's definition of calm...my ability to manage emotional reactivity.

I talked earlier about emotional flooding...that's what happens when anyone...me, you or the guy down the street "loses it." We've all experienced it. We have all lost it – we've all become so engulfed in emotion that we can't think. Our problem-solving brain has gone off-line and all that remains are our primal reactions of Fight – Flight – or Freeze. In the Age of COVID, primal reactions won't get the job done. There's nothing to FIGHT, nowhere to FLEE and the closest we can come to FREEZE is to shelter in place.

So how do we cope with heated emotions that understandably get triggered by this very real threat? The simple answer is self-care and self-talk.

Let me first comment on self-care. I want to own the self-care activities that work for me. You are welcome to take anything from my list that might be helpful. Self-care for me involves many aspects, several of which come immediately to mind.

I will start with breathing...simple, slow, deep breathing. Breathing is the common denominator of every self-care activity. Some of my breathing occurs in the intentional few minutes of meditation I practice every day. And just as importantly, I am intentional about sprinkling simple, slow, deep breathing throughout my day. I know my breathing practice is helpful because there are days when, at some point, I become aware of a slight headache or a tightness in my shoulders, neck or lower back and I realize...I have not been breathing. Well...I've been breathing but not in a way that reduces my stress. When my body speaks to me...I try to pay attention.

I'm absolutely better when I begin my day with a 3-mile walk. I know that when I'm hungry I lose focus and patience and when I'm tired everything is a bigger deal than it otherwise would be. Bottom line, when I'm hungry, tired or just not my best physical self, I have less bandwidth capacity for dealing with any degree of emotional complexity.

I like flexible routine...meaning I like and need a daily schedule, and at the same time, I want the option for some spontaneity in my day. Right now, my world is filled with all kinds of NOs, "No you can't." "No, not now." "No, and we don't know when or if it will be different." Therefore, in the interest of self-care I've decided to find alternate ways to get to "Yes." I'm working hard at releasing the way it's supposed to be and embracing the way it is...at least for now.

A prime component of my self-care is spending time in nature. Fortunately, I'm not super picky about what kind of nature I'm experiencing. I'm good, so long as there are trees and sunshine and enough quiet that I can hear the leaves rustle. Nature is my sanctuary; it's where and how I'm restored. Fortunately, I have that in abundance.

I am blessed to have smart and healthy adult children, fabulous grandchildren and a flock of like-minded friends who laugh both with me and sometimes at me. And, best of all, as the threat swirls around and around, I have a "for better or worse" life partner who is my love and my best friend.

My active and intentional self-care provides nourishment for my body, mind and spirit and gives me a reservoir of energy and patience. But without employing regular and vigorous self-talk no reservoir would ever be deep enough to tamp-down the many invitations this crisis presents to be emotional reactive...to lose it!

Let's agree on something...we all talk to ourselves...all the time. The issue at hand is what you are saying to yourself. Is it helpful or does it only serve to stir-up trouble?

Remember, we talked about being mindful...mindful of your emotions. Now I need to add, being mindful of what it is you are saying to yourself about your emotions. When you are triggered and the gush of distressing emotion is welling up inside of you, that's the time for some serious self-talk. And the SELF that shows up to talk with these distressing emotions needs your ADULT self, your higher order...best self.

Begin by naming the emotion.

Oh, I recognize you...its hurt or disappointment or jealousy or embarrassment or fear or a hundred other human emotions.

The sooner you name the emotion, the sooner your adult self can begin a conversation with that emotion. A respectful conversation can help you understand what triggered the emotion and, most importantly, you can then "hear" the important message the emotion is trying to communicate. If your emotion is not understood and not honored, then emotion's natural inclination is to escalate. At some point in the emotional escalation your brain will go off-line, and you will yield to your primal survival reactions...and there's no telling what you might say or do. The only sure bet is...it won't make the situation better.

To review, self-talk involves: 1) mindfully recognizing that an emotion has been activated; 2) naming the emotion; 3) honoring the information the emotion is communicating; 4) diffusing emotions' inclination to escalate; and 5) with your problem-solving brain on-line, taking action to address the situation.

Let me close by saying, as I write this everyone in our family and friendship circle is health and economically stable. For that I am deeply grateful, and I have no illusion, were that to dramatically change, CALM would be significantly more elusive.

As circumstances change...for better or for something more stressful, it's important to keep in mind that maintaining a constant state of CALM is not possible. The best I can do...you can do...anyone can do, is to get up every morning determined to be intentional about basing your perspective on facts, mindfully monitoring your emotions and bringing self-care and self-talk to the inevitable invitations to be emotionally reactive.

When you lose it...and you will... apologize to everyone affected. When others lose it, and they will, extend some grace. We all need it right now.

Be kind to others and gentle with yourself.

Thanks for listening and take care.

